

Chapter 6

WE HAD a job to do: training pilots and observers for battle duty “up north”, in a sense little different from non-combatants back home doing war work as munition workers or other reserved occupations. But as we were so far removed from the war it was easy for some sense of boredom to be reached. Whether from boredom (I’ve always claimed to be unboreable) or a sense of guilt as I soaked up the sun on the marvellous Muizenberg beach in Cape Town, I volunteered for a transfer to the war area in N. Africa. I was not altogether surprised to find my application turned down, this having probably been based on the fact that my minimal experience on antiquated *Anson* engines would have been of little use on the modern combat aircraft. Later on, I made one more attempt - by applying for a transfer to Okinawa. I must have been mad to apply. Had I been successful, this memoir would never have seen the light of day.

As the waiting period between getting the flights off and their return that time could hang heavily, some impromptu attempts were made to liven things up. I remember to this day a mock battle between two sets of chaps lining opposite sides of the now empty hangar. We were lying or crouching in firing position with anything remotely resembling a firearm and making imitation cracks and bangs. This went on for some time until young Alec Forbes brought things to a dramatic close by hobbling across the hangar, using a long-handled broom as a crutch, and waiving a dirty white rag in the other hand.

I was personally involved in a one-off performance: in an idle moment, I happened to come across a pile of greyish brown, shredded, wool-like material on the hangar floor. The temptation was too great. I scooped up a large quantity with both hands and put it on

my head, deftly patting it into quite a respectable coiffure. Rolling my eyes and wagging my bottom, I prinked my way about the hangar seeking attention - if not applause. What I hadn't bargained for was the unexpected arrival of the Station Officer who had come on the scene behind me. I sprang to a rigid "attention", but could not salute as he interrogated me about my current activity because my forage cap was not on my coiffure. With a completely deadpan face, I kept up the act as long as I could before admitting that it was just a matter of whiling away the time till the aircraft got back. He must have seen some of the point of it all, because as he turned away I could see he was suppressing something like laughter.

At the end of the training flight session, the ground -staff members of the flight - perhaps a dozen chaps - now eager for a meal, would line up, and the senior airman would march them back to billets. After passing the Duty Office, where there would be ordered an exaggerated "Eyes.....Rrright!!!", the flight would break up and find their own way back. There was quite a lot of night-flying training and how wonderful it was to get back for a midnight repast of devilled kidneys. Some of the enterprising mechanics and riggers would scrounge flights and get in almost as many flying hours as the pilots themselves. In the whole of my RAF career, I only clocked up four flying hours - all in the U.K before leaving for South Africa.

These halcyon days (separating us from active war by the distance of the Cape to Cairo car race), were for me interrupted twice when two of the *Ansons* of which I was the engine fitter, were written off my charge. The first, which did not involve the loss of life, caused me to be called in for questioning. I had completed my D.I., signed the official form and run up the two engines from the cockpit. They sounded healthy. Chocks away, I stood and watched it take off but it had only just cleared the perimeter hedge at around 50ft, when it

suddenly slewed to port, while remaining level. It disappeared from view and my heart sank with foreboding.

I was exonerated at the investigation, because although I had correctly checked the sliding controls of the petrol feed in the cockpit, I could not have known that something had fractured in the part of the fuel mechanism *behind* the panelling. The *Anson* had taken off on a full carburettor of petrol but, when the port engine supply ceased due to the unknown fracture, the starboard engine continued to function and this caused the plane to slew round but without enough power to remain in the air. The plane was a write-off but, fortunately, the crew was safe to fly again.

The second incident was a major catastrophe, this being neither engine, nor rigging failure but pilot error. One of the most popular of the South African pilots on the course had cleared the land and was over the sea but, not having gained sufficient height, probably turned too early and hit the water with his port wing tip. The pilot and trainee aircrew were all lost.

